



Labor/  
Community

# STRATEGY CENTER

CASE STUDY

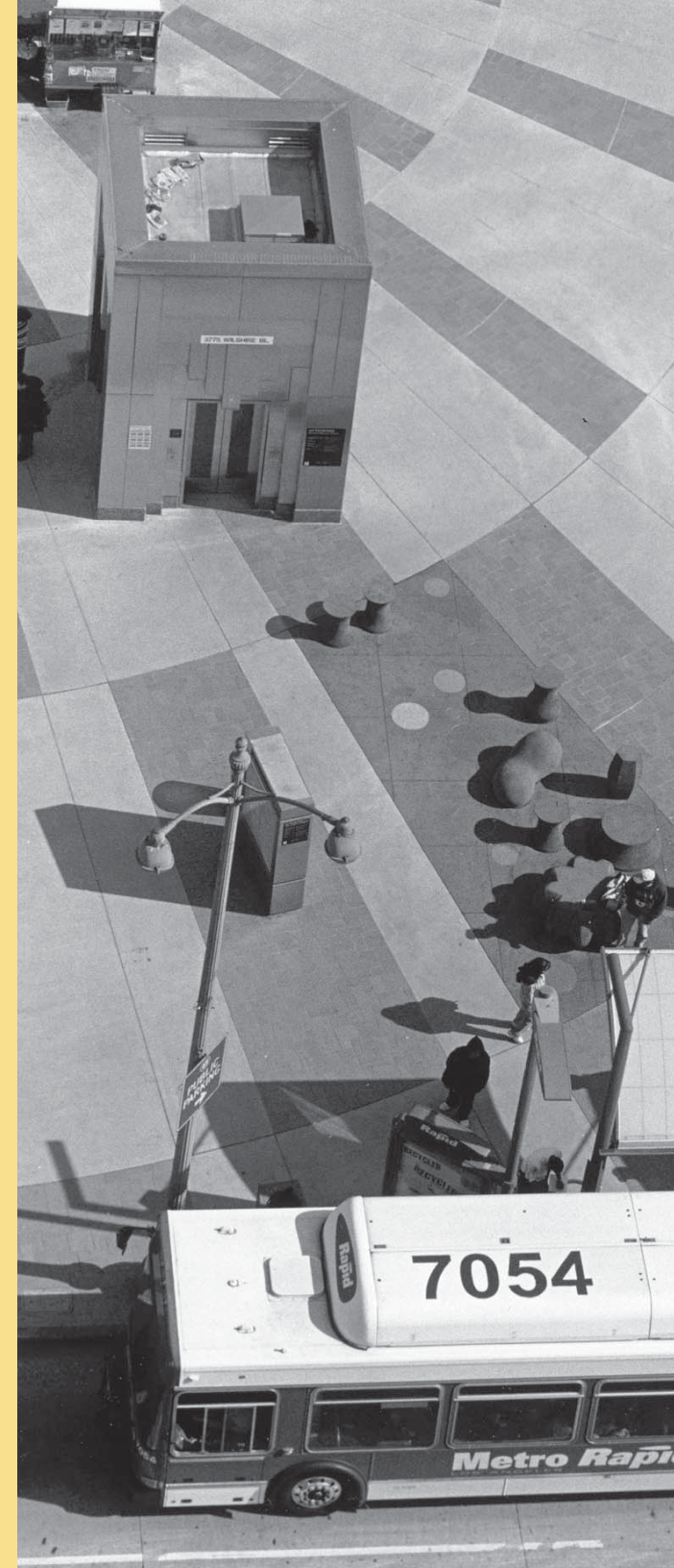


*Los Angeles, California*

**17 YEARS OF OVERCOMING  
ORGANIZING CHALLENGES IN L.A.**



FROM THE TOP FLOOR of the worn but historic 12-story Wiltern Theater on the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue, where the Labor/Community Strategy Center has its offices, the city of Los Angeles stretches as far as the eye can see – a daunting perspective for a group of committed organizers seeking to form a united front of oppressed people in this vast region of nearly ten million residents.





**T**he biggest city in California and the second-largest urban area in the nation, Los Angeles is a dense, richly diverse, multicultural, and multinational area that stretches more than 40 miles from the ocean to the mountains. The city's phenomenal growth into a tangled web of clogged streets and overburdened freeways has resulted in its distinction as a major hub of manufacturing, finance, and industry — and also infamy, as the most polluted metropolitan area in America (as ranked by the American Lung Association) with the worst traffic. Asthma among children in Los Angeles affects almost 400,000 youngsters, with exhaust from the ever-growing number of automobiles and industrial emissions among the causes.

Almost half of the residents of Los Angeles are Latino — approximately 1.8 million — and dozens of languages beyond Spanish are spoken at home and in schools. Building a cohesive movement to empower community members appears at first to be an impossible task. Finding common ground — both in the literal and figurative sense — is a tremendous challenge.

Enter the Bus Riders Union (BRU or *Sindicato de Pasajeros*, as it is known in the Latino communities of L.A.) a core project of the Labor/Community Strategy Center. “It’s a progressive civil rights group on wheels,” says Eric Mann, veteran organizer and founder and executive director of the Center. “We deal with what we call ‘the totality of people’s lives.’ Our main issue might be public transportation and the environment, but we’re also involved in global warming and international conditions. And our Community Rights Campaign deals with prisoners’ rights and civil rights. The BRU is a catch-all, but it’s also a terrific set of structures through which the Center can develop diverse campaigns.”

The Center, which sees its work as affecting the 10 million people and 4,000 square miles that define Los Angeles County, was founded in 1989 following a successful United Auto Workers campaign that — with broad community support — delayed for 10 years the closure of a General Motors plant in Van Nuys, in L.A.’s San Fernando Valley. The Center went on to tackle clean air issues in Wilmington and other working-class communities in the neighborhoods that surround the L.A. harbor, where concentrations of petrochemical refineries are located.

“We met a lot of people who said, ‘L.A. has a two-tiered transit system.’ The buses are a third-class system for Third World people. And the train is the wasted-money construction project for elite suburbanites. With L.A. County’s size, you’d need the Pentagon budget to have a viable train system like New York’s,” said Mann, a former New Yorker. “To my surprise, the transportation planners kept saying rail is not the way to go. And, the city’s raiding the bus system to pay for rail. Every rail project is over budget. So I said, ‘Wow, the issue is going to be a fight between bus and rail over funding. Meanwhile, buses are overcrowded and breaking down.’”

## KEEPING ORGANIZING EFFORTS ROLLING ON BUSES

Soon after the Center received a grant to organize residents around mass transit inequities, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) announced fare hikes and service cuts in order to finance the expansion of light rail, which serves a disproportionately smaller, more affluent, and less diverse ridership. The MTA – which is governed by a 13-member board consisting of five county supervisors, council members from four local cities, and the mayor of Los Angeles and three of his appointees – designs, constructs, and operates the countywide bus and rail system. The agency’s plans provided the Center with the opportunity to reach out broadly to constituents throughout Los Angeles who relied on public transportation to get to work, to school, and to other destinations.

Initiated in 1992 as the Center’s Transportation Policy Group, it changed its name to the Bus Riders Union (BRU) during a hearing the MTA held on the fare increases and proposed cuts in service – which attracted a crowd of more than 800 people. “Everyone was saying that the buses were no good, and that the MTA was killing the bus system in favor of rail – when one of our members got up and said, ‘What we need is a Bus Riders Union!’ And everyone in the audience agreed,” recalled Mann. The renamed group was soon organizing bus riders in a “Billions for Buses” campaign to confront the “transit racism” inherent in the MTA’s policies, and challenged the agency to make the bus system, not rail, its top funding priority.

The BRU does most of its organizing on and around buses and bus stops in Los Angeles, focusing primarily in South and East L.A., Pico Union, and Koreatown – where the greatest concentrations of low-income and transit-dependent people live, work, and go to school. “The impact of our work is magnified, because if you take a bus, it goes to all of these places. And many of the riders are on the bus for a considerable amount of time. It takes a long time to go from East L.A. to a job on the west side.”



**“In L.A., you have many places where you can sort of make a political home. I felt this one spoke to me the most because I think they had a very clear political analysis of what the problems are.”**

*Manuel Criollo, Bus Riders Union organizer*



**“The Strategy Center lets you go through your life stages, and wherever you are, there’s a place for you here. You don’t have to go out on the buses. You can work on the website. You can write a paper. You can design community art. There’s always a job for you here.”**

*Eric Mann, executive director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center*

The BRU says it represents about 400,000 bus riders, with primary emphasis on a group of about 50,000 riders they see regularly on the buses in low-income communities where fare increases and cuts in service most affect bus riders, their budgets, and their capacity to get to work. It is also where overcrowded buses are the norm.

As a direct result of the BRU’s countywide campaigns, 2,000 dilapidated diesel buses have been replaced with 2,000 buses that use compressed natural gas. This significantly reduces air pollution. Beyond this, BRU victories have included increasing the MTA fleet by 350 buses; hiring more than 700 bus drivers; making public transportation more affordable (through reduced-fare, monthly and weekly passes for low-income families).

#### **BUILDING UPON MASS TRANSIT ISSUES**

The Bus Riders Union is more than just the Center’s most highly visible project; it is key to the organization’s success – with buses serving, in many ways, as a metaphor for movement building. Buses criss-cross geographic and social boundaries enabling BRU organizers to mobilize the vast, largely working-class ridership around mass transit and other local, statewide, national, and international issues. By leveraging riders’ heightened political consciousness, the BRU works to build solidarity to confront the criminal justice system, the rights of indigenous people in Mexico and Latin America, and most recently, the war in Iraq. Thus, while transit issues are very real and important to address, they are also a core foundation used by the Labor/Community Strategy Center to continually rebuild and renew its grassroots outreach. Consciously aware of the metaphor, buses provide an ever-moving site of contestation: a progressive civil rights movement on wheels.

“We find people with grievances that are immediately felt and experienced daily, and then work with them through political education to build a more developed social consciousness,” explained Geoff Ray, the Center’s longtime administrator, who first came to the organization while in graduate school – intending to make the Center the focus of his dissertation. (That was about 15 years ago.)

The Center’s strategy and successes rely on a well-informed and trained staff who can help people make the leap from transit issues to larger movement-building goals. Cynthia Rojas, a young but seasoned organizer at the Center, said she makes a daily effort to build that bridge. “We talk to people about more than just their ride from East L.A., where many low-income people live, to the Westside, where many of them work as domestics, maintenance workers, and in other service jobs. Even though we generally begin our conversations talking about the really horrible bus system, it’s really just one example of a systemic racist and classist society. I think this is very important in how we strategize and organize, and the type of change we’ve been able to make. It’s helpful to have a long-term objective if you’re going to stay in this type of work. As opposed to saying, ‘OK, we’ve won the 20 and the 21 bus lines,’ we think, ‘What does that mean for the invasion of Iraq or that anti-immigrant bill that’s coming up?’”

#### **WINNING A MAJOR VICTORY**

In October 1996, the Labor/Community Strategy Center won a landmark consent decree following a class action civil rights lawsuit they brought against the MTA two years earlier. The suit, filed with the help of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, charged the MTA with violating the 1964 Civil Rights Act by using federal funds to establish a discriminatory transportation system. The action resulted in a 10-year agreement in which the MTA is obligated to improve L.A.’s bus system, placing the BRU in a unique role as the court-appointed class representative of L.A.’s transit ridership. The BRU is entrusted – through this consent decree – with the responsibility of monitoring frequency of service and overcrowding on the buses.

“Our attorneys came up with the idea of the Joint Working Group, which consists of representatives from the Bus Riders Union, who brought the case to the courts, and representatives from the MTA. It was like establishing us as the bargaining agent. No federal or state agency has ever had anything like this – where a group is given the authority to negotiate on behalf of 400,000 bus riders,” explained Mann. “We have the only in-house grassroots legal department of non-lawyers, monitoring the consent decree.” This team monitors actual conditions such as overcrowding. They read MTA reports; they read overcrowding reports; they check whether or not the buses are really out on the street; they monitor whether buses are being purchased.

**“There's something unique about Los Angeles that provides opportunities for the kind of social movements that are crying out to be built. L.A. is not just multi-racial, it's a multi-national, immigrant-based population. We had to become a trilingual organization, and speak to this huge diversity of experiences of various kinds of oppression.”**

*Geoff Ray, Labor/Community Strategy Center administrator*





Hee Pok  
“Grandma”  
Kim

**SHE IS KNOWN AFFECTIONATELY** in the Bus Riders Union as “Grandma Kim.” And it seems nothing can stop the 82-year-old Korean native from fighting for the rights of bus riders, workers, and immigrants – not her advanced age, not her limited English, and not even harsh criticism from her peers.

“They say I am crazy. They say I should be staying home – that organizing is the work of young people, not old people,” she says through an interpreter. “I don’t listen to them.”

Hee Pok Kim immigrated to the United States in 1988 to join her two sons who were living in Los Angeles and became a citizen in 1997. She grew up in the countryside of what is now North Korea, where her father was a leader in the Korean independence movement when Japan occupied the peninsula from 1910 to 1945. As a child, she transmitted secret messages between independence fighters and her uncle. She says her grade school was run by independence movement leaders, who planted seeds of activism.

Kim, living in North Korea in 1950, lost most of her family in the war. Her husband went out one day to get medicine for one of their sick children and was never heard from again. She searched for her younger brother’s corpse in a vegetable field, and after uncovering his body, identified him by a birthmark on his leg. “After I cried for him, I buried him again,” she told *Koream* magazine in an April 2003 cover story.

If things are not proceeding, the BRU challenges MTA. And according to Mann, sometimes the MTA says: “Who the hell are you to tell us how to run the bus company?” And we say, “You signed a consent decree with us. It gives us the power.”

A major test of the Center’s ability to transcend transit issues will come in October 2006, when the deadline for the consent decree runs out. In August 2004, the U.S. District Court dismissed a motion by the BRU to extend – by an additional six years – the decree, and its accompanying federal oversight. The Center contends that the MTA has been moving too slowly in making improvements and will not meet its 2006 deadline. The Special Master appointed by a federal judge to oversee the consent decree, said the BRU must provide evidence of its claims and can refile its motion between September 2005 and May 2006.

And while the Center’s activity through the Bus Riders Union has brought attention to the Center and its work, since its inception the BRU has also overshadowed other Center campaigns. “It is our front-line campaign, it is the best movie we could do. But we’re much more than that,” said Mann.

#### **STRESSING DIVERSITY AND INTER-GENERATIONAL PARTICIPATION**

A key aspect of the Center’s organizing work and leadership development is its commitment to diversity. Both members and staff represent a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, creating a democratic, multilingual, multiracial, gender-balanced organization that uses anti-racism as a foundation for organizing, and strongly supports language rights. The result is that all meetings, discussions, events, demonstrations, and even the group’s annual fundraiser, are trilingual affairs, with simultaneous translations provided through headsets. People speak English, Spanish, Korean – whatever language they’re most comfortable with. This has resulted in a membership that is stronger and more respectful of language rights.

Consistent with the Center’s commitment to diversity is its inter-generational model in which both young people and retirees play equally active roles. Throughout its structure, low-income people, particularly Latinos, African Americans, women, immigrants, and monolingual Spanish and Korean speakers, hold major leadership positions. Among the members: an 82-year-old Korean native who as a child delivered secret messages given to her by her uncle, a local leader in the independence underground when Japan occupied what is now North Korea; a 70-year-old African American who was active in the Civil Rights Movement and the co-founder of the Peace and Freedom Party; a 69-year-old Mexican native who works as a room service waiter at the posh Beverly Wilshire Hotel by day, and volunteers at the Center in the evening – and has never missed a meeting in his 10 years of service; and a cadre of young college students who come from diverse walks of life.

**“At first, it was just curiosity. I wanted to see what they were doing. As time goes by, I feel like there’s a kind of magical power that draws me in. The more I get involved in this organization, the more I feel like I am a part of it. I want to take better care of my health now so I can keep doing things.”**

*Hee Pok “Grandma” Kim,  
Bus Riders Union organizer*





Kim joined the BRU in 2001 after meeting a young Korean American organizer-in-training from the Labor/Community Strategy Center, who had noticed the large number of seniors on the buses getting groceries, attending ESL classes, and going to medical appointments. Kim asked him why the BRU fliers were only in English and Spanish, and he asked if she would be willing to get involved in the fight for improved public transit. Kim soon began attending meetings.

“Once I came and attended a meeting, I saw that the mentality of the young people was really healthy and sound, so that made me want to join and participate,” she said.

Kim went on to become one of the BRU’s most active and vocal members. She is a fixture in her Koreatown neighborhood, where she talks to other bus riders about overcrowding and proposed fare increases. She can be seen demonstrating in solidarity outside Korean supermarkets to demand better conditions for workers. And she is an unforgettable presence at board meetings of the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), where, through an interpreter, she testifies passionately on behalf of seniors like herself.

“Even at my age, I am learning how to live life again. I have an opportunity through this organization to contribute something to society. I don’t want to live my life doing nothing. As long as my health permits, I will continue doing this type of work,” she says, adding with a playful chuckle: “I am Super Grandma.”



**Rosalio  
Mendiola**

**LIKE A COMIC BOOK SUPERHERO**, each day Rosalio Mendiola sheds his white room service uniform and dons a bright yellow Bus Riders Union T-Shirt before making his way from his job at the posh Beverly Wilshire Hotel to the Labor/Community Strategy Center offices – a 30-minute bus ride. En route, Mendiola transforms from a mild-mannered hotel worker into an in-your-face community organizer.

The bus is crowded with weary commuters on their way home from work – many of them, like Mendiola, service workers who put in a full day of physical labor. But the 69-year-old native of Mexico perseveres, passing out fliers and talking to passengers about the BRU’s demands for improved bus service and lower fares as part of the Center’s efforts to improve mass transit and reduce the number of air-polluting cars on the road.

“I have a voice, and a responsibility to speak out against injustice,” he says. “No matter what, I’m going to fight.”

In addition to his organizing work, Mendiola has testified at numerous hearings and meetings. He was one of the first to sign on for the BRU’s student pass campaign, which demands the MTA distribute student bus passes at every school, eliminate the bus pass application process, and reduce the cost of student monthly passes from \$20 to \$10.



**“The Bus  
Riders Union  
is successful  
because  
people  
really feel  
this is *their*  
organization.”**

*Damon Azali,  
Labor/Community  
Strategy Center organizer*

While people from all age groups provide valuable contributions to the Center, it is the energy, passion, and idealism of the youthful organizers who handle much of the labor-intensive planning and day-to-day organizing work. They are clearly the heart of the organization and key to its future success. To ensure a fresh supply of young people, the Center relies on its training program – a six-month boot camp-style “school” that immerses students in the theory and “praxis” of community organizing – enabling a new group of recruits to come up through the ranks each year. Mann feels strongly that successful leadership development is achieved by giving young people positive reinforcement and the chance to take on responsibility.

#### **ENSURING FUTURE SUCCESS THROUGH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

The Center’s National School for Strategic Organizing provides a solid curriculum that takes young organizers through the history of social movements, while engaging them in actual organizing work. Courses include women’s studies, black studies, organizing strategies and tactics, and cultural studies. “Our program is more theoretical and ideological than typical organizing training programs,” said Mann. “We’re trying to develop long-distance runners. We think you need a philosophical overview for that.”

Because the school makes a high intensity investment in a relatively small number of organizers – with the hope of having a very high retention rate – it is limited in the number of organizers it can currently train. An increasing number of organizations in other cities have requested that the organizing school be open to other individuals or groups. In 2005 it brought 300 people from all over the U.S. for its Future of Transportation Conference, and in 2006 planned its first National Organizers Exchange to address these opportunities.

### PROVIDING A LIFE-ALTERING EXPERIENCE

The Labor/Community Strategy Center is more than the brains and muscle behind a movement-building experiment in Los Angeles. For some, it is a life-altering experience. “People join social movements for a sense of social transformation and also a sense of belonging,” said Mann. “If you don’t offer them a community along with this kind of transformative politics, then you can’t sustain people at the core leadership level.”

For organizer Damon Azali, who worked briefly as a substitute teacher and youth worker in public schools, the Center is a place where people understand his growing disillusionment with how society tackles problems. “I just didn’t have the words for it, or know where to go with it. I would talk to my friends, and they would say, ‘There goes Damon with all his theories.’ Here, I can have a meaningful conversation with people who share my thoughts and feelings.”

Barbara Lott Holland, a middle-aged African American woman, had counted herself among the largely apathetic residents of L.A. She was transformed by her experiences in the BRU from someone who refused to even admit she was a bus rider, into one of public transit’s strongest advocates. As a result of her involvement in the BRU – eventually becoming its volunteer co-chair – she has become a champion, not only of buses, but of language rights and international struggles. “I joined the BRU when Prop. 227 was trying to force primarily Spanish-speaking kids to speak English and give up their native language. I first thought, ‘I can’t speak my African language, why is it OK for you to speak Spanish?’ And then I realized that wasn’t the type of person I wanted to be. I realized that because these rights were taken from me was no reason why they should be taken from someone else. I realized that I had the opportunity to fight and struggle to actually make things happen.”

For the organization’s younger members, like Cynthia Rojas, their political awakening experience leads to accelerated maturity. “It’s made me a much more mature person, more grounded. You get a sense that there’s a world so much bigger than me out there. I am one server in this movement and, you know, it puts things into perspective.”

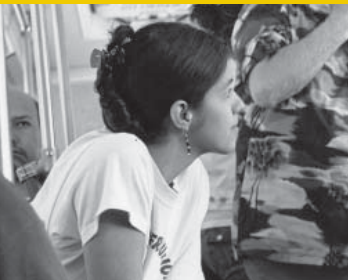


Mendiola, who has worked at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel for more than 30 years, joined the BRU in 1994 and became a lead plaintiff in a suit two years later against the Metropolitan Transit Authority, which resulted in a court-ordered consent decree. The suit charged the MTA with “transit racism” and alleged the city was diverting federal funds away from buses to pay for rail, which serves a smaller, more affluent and less diverse ridership. To avoid the suit, the MTA agreed to a 10-year contract which obligates it to improve L.A.’s bus system.

Mendiola has participated in the BRU’s *teatro*, a form of street theater where members stage brief plays at bus stops and on moving buses to dramatize the struggle between the BRU and the MTA. And he has traveled to Chiapas to show solidarity with the Zapatista Indian rights movement on behalf of the Strategy Center.

A member of the BRU’s planning committee – where his favorite task is being in charge of the food – Mendiola has not missed or been late to a meeting in 10 years. He is also an active member of Local 11 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union.

“It’s been an honor. I feel fortunate to have within our membership so many dedicated people from diverse backgrounds,” says Mendiola about his involvement in the BRU. “We are a good example for the world.”



Cynthia  
Rojas

**CYNTHIA ROJAS** was 21 and on summer break from her studies at Stanford University when she showed up for the first day of class at the Labor/Community Strategy Center's National School for Organizing. "Before that, I had no clue that people did this and have been doing this for many years," said the now 29-year-old native of Houston, Texas.

Today, she is a seasoned organizer with the skills and perseverance to take on one of Los Angeles' largest public institutions: the Metropolitan Transit Authority. Eric Mann, executive director of the Center, says he has seen her blossom from a reserved young woman into one of the Center's most dynamic leaders.

"Cynthia is a brilliant tactician," he said. "She has pulled off some terrific maneuvers at meetings before the MTA, like the time they were going to vote on an item without public comment first. She goes up to the microphone, and they say, 'Sit down or we'll call the cops.' She responds, 'Sir, you are out of order. If you look at the agenda, you are about to vote on something that should be in public comment. You've moved it into the consent calendar, which is not appropriate because I put in a card to discuss the item.' So they take it off the consent calendar and make it available for discussion because they have to. She knows the minutiae of the parliamentary rules."

Rojas grew up in a working-class family headed by a single mother who left school in



**"There are two things we hope we're doing differently: institution-building and organizing people across racial lines."**

*Kikanza Ramsey, former organizer and current board member, Labor/Community Strategy Center*

#### **CARRYING ON A MOVEMENT-BUILDING TRADITION**

Rojas sees a strong comparison between the Center and the Civil Rights Movement. "We're successful in attracting so many long-term organizers and activists because they see what we do within the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement, which wasn't just about trying to win votes. It was trying to radicalize the whole country," said Rojas. "It was about a revolution. We are in that tradition. I think what we are doing is very comparable in the sense that it's based on the theory of transformative organizing."

Mann said the Center's participation in recent demonstrations against the war in Iraq provides vivid reminders that BRU members can inspire others to get involved. "Our young people started a drum and chant corps with about 25 people, and the next thing you know, people are calling to simply ask where we're going to be situated in the parade because they want to march with us."

Kikanza Ramsey, the Center's first organizer who now sits on the board of directors, explained that while the organization gets inspiration from the past, it also learns from history. "There are two things we hope we're doing differently: institution-building and organizing people across racial lines. There are some models of organizing which

say that race is very divisive. We say that ‘racism’ – not ‘race’ – is what’s divisive. Race is a central theme in U.S. society, and we think that we can organize around it in a unifying way. This is not to say that we romanticize the challenge that comes with it. But having taken on that challenge, I think it’s one of the things that have kept us going for 17 years.”

#### **BUILDING VALUABLE NETWORKS THROUGH SOLIDARITY WITH OTHERS**

While working to expand its support among low-income families and people of color, the Center strives to make connections with groups locally and beyond. The BRU’s Student Bus Pass campaign – which demanded that the MTA reduce the cost of a student pass, eliminate the bus pass application process, and distribute passes at every school – garnered support from diverse organizations such as Coalition for Educational Justice and Communities for a Better Environment, as well as youth, teacher, and parent groups. Conversely, when local Korean grocers demonstrated against large supermarket chains that were driving many of them out of business, staff and volunteers from the Center joined the march.

International solidarity is also important in carrying out the Center’s philosophy. In addition to expanding its network of partners and supporters, the Center consistently places its struggles within the global context. Staff and volunteers have traveled abroad to learn firsthand about the successes and challenges of diverse international civil and human rights movements, and to work in unity with them. BRU members have participated in the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa, observed national elections in El Salvador, and traveled to Chiapas, Mexico to support the Zapatistas.

“I think there are a lot of folks who understand the importance of long term international struggle because they’ve seen liberation and democracy crushed around the world, when it’s isolated,” said Geoff Ray.

#### **USING TEATRO AND CREATIVITY TO ORGANIZE**

Bright yellow T-shirts emblazoned with “Billions for Buses” promotes the BRU’s messages on buses, in the street, and at demonstrations. But the more unusual activities really stand out. BRU members donned inhalator face masks at MTA meetings to illustrate their concern over L.A.’s dirty air. And organizers have used *teatro* (guerrilla street theater) on moving buses and at bus stops to engage, entertain, and inform passengers.

**“All of our projects are part of an inter-related whole. This is a movement center – we have to rebuild a movement, not just build projects. You don’t change society through projects. From the very beginning we wanted to see the Labor/Community Strategy Center as a movement center that would allow people to talk strategy, starting with ourselves. It is not obvious how to change society.”**

*Eric Mann, executive director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center*



Mexico at age 13 to immigrate to the United States. Her mother worked as a waitress and cab driver, and later married a construction worker. Rojas attended public school where teachers saw her potential and placed her in a program for gifted students. Before her senior year in high school, she enrolled in a summer internship program where a mentor suggested she apply to Harvard University. She did, and also sent applications to Rice, Stanford, and the University of Texas. She was accepted to all four schools, and chose Stanford, majoring in comparative studies in race and ethnicity.

In college, Rojas met a student who had gone through the National School for Organizing at the Center. “A friend actually pushed me to apply,” she recalled. “I had no idea what organizing was.” Despite her mother’s adamant opposition to her leaving school to go “talk to poor people on the bus,” the summer of 1999 was an unforgettable one for Rojas. “We came during the exciting time of the ‘No Seat, No Fare’ campaign,” said Rojas, referring to a fare strike launched in protest of overcrowded conditions on buses, which resulted in her first arrest.

That fall, Rojas returned to college a changed woman before accepting a staff position at the Center after graduation. “Things were different. I knew so much more about the world – of politics, U.S. foreign policy, domestic policy, and more. It put a lot of things into perspective.”



Eric  
Mann

**A VETERAN** of the Civil Rights Movement, Labor/Community Strategy Center executive director Eric Mann began his activist career while he was a student at Cornell University in the early sixties – a period in history that inspires the work he continues today.

On February 1, 1960, a group of Black college students from North Carolina A&T University refused to leave a Woolworth's lunch counter in nearby Greensboro, where they had been denied service. This led to a wave of sit-ins in college towns across the South. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was created on the campus of Shaw University in Raleigh two months later to coordinate sit-ins and publicize their activities. The group recruited Mann to join in their struggle, which had moved beyond the lunch counter sit-ins to other pressing issues such as housing and job discrimination, voting rights, and segregation.

After graduating from Cornell in 1964, Mann, a Brooklyn native born to a Jewish garment worker family, went to work for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in New York. Founded in 1942, the organization challenged segregation and other discriminatory laws of the deep South using non-violent civil disobedience. One of Mann's first campaigns was a boycott of the Trailways Bus Company, which was targeted for its discriminatory policies against African American employees (Blacks were hired only as



Martín Hernández, BRU co-chair and a longtime Center organizer at nights and on weekends, and a social worker by day, came up with the idea for the performances and a grant encouraged BRU members to train with Cornerstone, a Los Angeles-based theater company. Hernández had studied theater in college.

The idea proved to be an effective organizing tool. “A lot of times when you’re talking with someone on the bus, whether it’s one-on-one or maybe four people at a time, the conversation is diffused. And if you give somebody a flier, they may read it, but they can also throw it in the trash when they get off the bus,” said Hernández. “But during the time you’re on the bus, you’ve got a captive audience, so it’s a great place for theater. It’s based on a tradition of street theater that raises the outrage of people, raises consciousness, and brings people in.”

In one skit called “Dolores’ Dilemma,” Barbara Lott-Holland played a bride, complete with a white wedding gown, who is waiting for her suitor (played by Hernández) to show up. He arrives late, blaming the overcrowded buses that didn’t stop for him for his tardiness. She refuses to believe him, which elicits immediate response from the bus riders who are now a captive and participatory audience. “The passengers on the bus really get involved, telling me (as Dolores) to believe Martín’s story, that the buses are overcrowded and routinely cause delays for passengers,” said Lott-Holland, who explained how the Center’s use of *Teatro* successfully bridges action and analysis. “We were trying to figure out how to reach people. We were distributing fliers. We were talking to people. But they were not really getting it. So we thought, ‘What can we do to move people? What can we do to motivate them?’ The Strategy Center is what we call a ‘think tank/act tank.’ We look at a situation and try to figure out how to make it better.”



### BACKING ACTION WITH RESEARCH, ANALYSIS, AND STRATEGY

Because the Center's work involves research and analysis, as well as action, Mann hopes to build on the intellectual tradition of organizing. "Every one of our campaigns has a philosophical and theoretical overview that takes the issue beyond where the person who is having the direct experience would begin or end their own thinking," he said.

"We don't just do things on the fly," said Cynthia Rojas. "We're very professional about how we do things. Members and staff study transit policy and federal legislation, and know their topics well enough to debate professionals on matters such as service cuts or fare increases. So we know our stuff. When we're talking to press, we can debate point by point what MTA is putting out. And it's not just 'woe is us, we're poor, please don't raise our fare.' We put out alternatives to raising the fare, we point out why MTA is choosing a fare increase as opposed to not building another rail line. We spend hours talking about it. We really do think about how everything we do is moving toward the objective of the organization."

Tactic and strategy are the ongoing focus of discussions and debate. "Before organizing on the buses, we worked hard to establish good relationships with the bus drivers. The first thing we do when we board a bus is to pay homage to the driver, not only because the driver can call the cops, but because drivers have authority on the buses. So one person organizes on the bus while the other hangs with the driver and explains how we support them: 'We're trying to get more buses that burn cleaner fuel. We would like everybody sitting and nobody standing on the bus.'"

porters and were not allowed to drive buses, sell tickets or work as information clerks). A year-long battle led to a climatic change in Trailways' hiring practices.

Mann left CORE to work with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) on an anti-poverty community organizing project in Newark, New Jersey, where rent strikes and sit-ins resulted in a number of buildings being repaired, houses inspected, and codes enforced. He was intensely involved in activities against the Vietnam War, then spent the next 35 years in a number of civil rights and anti-racist movements. "And I haven't looked back," said the life-long activist. "The only difficulty I have is which group to join, which strategy to have, which book to read, which demonstration to be in."

Convinced that college-educated leftists could organize from within the working class, Mann worked in hospitals in Boston and then Berkeley, where he moved to be with his wife, Lian Hurst Mann, who teaches at the Center's National School for Organizing. Together, they became auto workers for General Motors and helped mobilize the union and rally broad community support to delay the closure of a GM plant in Van Nuys, north of Los Angeles. The plant stayed open for 10 more years. With this momentum, the Strategy Center was founded in 1989, tackling air quality and then public transit issues with its most visible project, the Bus Riders Union.

"The challenge in our work is to get beyond the fight for low cost public transportation, beyond militant group interest, beyond 'mine,' and beyond prejudice, to challenge the consumer culture in the fight for real community through true transformative organizing. A lot of my work now is training a new generation of leadership – not that I plan to leave anytime soon – to carry on this tradition," said Mann.



Barbara  
Lott-Holland

**BARBARA LOTT-HOLLAND** still stumbles when asked if she rides the bus. “I’m not a bus rider – I am a bus rider,” she says with a laugh. “It’s been like a rude awakening.”

Along with her realization that she was just as dependent on public transit as hundreds of thousands of other L.A. residents who rely on buses to get to work or school, she experienced an awakening of a different kind: a political one.

Though she began riding the bus because she couldn’t afford a car, Lott-Holland has become one of the most prominent leaders of the Bus Riders Union – not only making the transition from a reluctant passenger to a fighter for quality mass transit, but also from a stereotypical apathetic L.A. resident to an outspoken supporter of civil and environmental rights.

Originally from Houston, Lott-Holland moved to L.A. in 1968. She recalls a stop on the train to California. “I was trying to buy an apple. I was first in line. They waited on everyone but me. And this black woman came up and said, ‘Honey, they’re *not* going to serve you.’ I couldn’t wait to get to L.A. so I could be treated as an equal. Of course, I got here, and kept waiting.”

She landed a job as a salesperson, moved up to accounting, got married, and raised a family. The faltering economy in 2000 left her without a job – and without a car. “I found myself on the bus and noticed service was worse than what it was years ago – buses showing up late or not showing up at all, and continually breaking down.”



Soon, the drivers respond: ‘You’re right. I can’t drive this bus, it’s unsafe.’ So we got a sense that the drivers were very open to the idea that a better bus system is better for them, too.”

About three years ago, mechanics of L.A.’s Amalgamated Transit Union went on a 32-day strike. Recognizing the importance of transportation for low income workers, the BRU established a “people’s bus.” “We got vans and ran shuttle services from 6:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. in certain corridors,” explained Damon Azali. “Organizers were getting up at 4:00 a.m. – renting the vans, cleaning them, having literature ready, showing up at their locations, and running the shuttles until evening. Then we debriefed, went home, had a nap and came back and worked the rest of the next day.” The BRU estimates that it transported about 7,000 people in 20 days. Azali clarifies: “This was something that the people needed and nobody else was providing it, so that was what we did.”

Organizers are also strategic in selecting which bus lines to target. “There are more than 200 bus lines. We pick lines that have 10-20,000 riders per day. And we built those routes like an electoral candidate would pick certain districts in order to get reelected.

**“It’s about changing the culture, changing the way people think about bus riders. People think ‘Only the lowest people ride the bus.’ If you were anyone of substance, you’d have a car and be on the freeway, sucking up fumes. So, it’s OK to be a bus rider. If we band together and demand a first-class bus system, people might want to be bus riders too.”**

*Barbara Lott-Holland, Bus Riders Union Planning Committee Co-Chair*





We have certain bus lines that we're famous on, so our penetration on those lines is very high. If you're a regular rider, you'll see us once a week," said Mann.

Publications are also important for the Center's emphasis on research and analysis, prior to action. Booklets such as "Immigrants Rights – and Wrongs," and "L.A.'s Lethal Air" (which explains the problems of air pollution in lay terms), encourage study and debate among bus riders, workers, academics, and organizers.

"We need more publications, more writing, a more common set of literature that everybody is reading and debating," says Mann "These publications need to say, 'This is our strategy, this is our experience, this is the sum-up of our work, and this is what we think the lessons are for us.'"

Accessing funding is an ongoing challenge for the Center. Its decidedly ideological nature, anti-racist philosophy, and aggressive anti-corporate stance concern some funders and energize others. Hernández says he doesn't fear being marginalized. "We can say we are a left organization. We are of that tradition. But we're not a disorganized group yelling and screaming, and not succeeding. We've won actual victories. A lot of groups that are on the margins don't win a lot of things," he said. "But then people saw that there were concrete gains in our work, a principle, an ethic – 2,500 new buses and 3,000 members is a good beginning."

One day, while on the bus, a BRU organizer gave her a flier. "I remembered seeing them organizing on the bus before, but I didn't want to be bothered." This time, an impending transit strike threatened her ability to get to work. "I found myself, by necessity, getting involved. It was affecting my livelihood. And since they seemed to know what buses were running, I thought I'd hang out with these people until the strike was over. Then I'd go on my merry way." But, she didn't.

"Barbara has become one of the organization's most vocal advocates for language rights," says Eric Mann, executive director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center. "When we have our monthly BRU membership meeting, everybody uses a headset so they can hear simultaneous translations – provided by our multilingual members – of what people are saying. But some people don't like that. Some say: 'Why do I have to listen to Spanish and Korean?' But, Barbara, who co-chairs the Planning Committee, says: 'Because if you don't, I'm not going to call on you. If you don't want to hear what she has to say, why should she hear what you have to say? Now, either put on the headphones or thank you for coming.' This has an amazing effect -- seeing a black woman strongly defending Latino and Asian language rights."

In addition to sharing Planning Committee leadership duties, she became involved in BRU's *teatro*, and has attended international solidarity conferences such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa.

"A few years ago, I wouldn't have thought of myself as a civil rights leader," she says. "That's changed since I've become a part of this organization. I am growing, developing, and feeling good about the legacy I will leave behind for my grandchildren. And hopefully, they will take up the fight."





## LOOKING AHEAD

Looking ahead, people at the Center think the biggest challenge (one that is more paramount than funding, but perhaps tied to it) is the apathy of the average L.A. resident. But organizers trained by the National School for Strategic Organizing – like Azali, Rojas, Hernández, and others simply forge ahead. Indeed, Geoff Ray believes the Center offers a serious ray of hope among such widespread lack of interest in social justice issues. “We spend a lot of time dealing with membership retention and leadership development,” he said. “This has to be a fun place where social relationships are as important as the political ones. But if you don’t speak to the bigger roots, if you’re not trying to make sense of the whole picture, then I think people will get apathetic here, too.”

Hernández sees complacency equally as challenging as apathy. “People have a low set of expectations. How do you raise people’s expectations? That’s what we try to do.”

And perhaps the organization’s impact is explained best by its most senior organizer, Grandma Kim who says, “People are really surprised that I’m 82 years old. I was walking with someone who was 70 years old – 12 years younger than me – but I was far ahead of her. And she said to me, ‘You’re flying – you’re flying because you do good work.’”



## Taking the Bus: *A Day in the Life of an Organizer*

*Labor/Community Strategy Center*

*Los Angeles, California*

### **6:10 a.m.** **Corner of Wilshire and Westwood Boulevards** **Bus Line #21**

At the intersection of Wilshire and Westwood boulevards – where gleaming towers and upscale shops rise above spotless sidewalks – early morning commuters rush to work, including L.A.’s vast, largely Latino labor force of domestic workers: gardeners, maids, and others who take buses to work in the city’s more affluent communities.

As these workers wait for their buses to arrive, Eulalia Camargo and Francisca Porchas, members of the Labor/Community Strategy Center’s Bus Riders Union, hand out fliers about proposed cuts in bus service by the city’s Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA). Camargo, a spry, talkative native of El Salvador and a retired domestic worker, manages to rile up several passengers about the cuts.

Porchas, a young woman born in Mexico and raised in Phoenix, explains how the cuts would eliminate local service from Westwood to Santa Monica, leaving

only the Rapid Transit bus service, which has limited stops. The local line – which is able to make stops at every intersection along Wilshire Boulevard – operates 24 hours a day, serving the many maintenance workers who clean buildings through the night and early mornings. She says the proposed cuts would also affect domestic workers, who travel long distances to get to work. The MTA contends that another regional bus company serves many of these passengers, but because it is a different system, bus riders would have to pay for an additional ticket – a financial hardship for many workers. Porchas and Camargo are looking for recruits to testify at the upcoming MTA board meeting to challenge proposed service cuts. Camargo says it’s difficult because the hearings are held when workers are at their jobs.

### **7:30 a.m.**

Nearby at Burger King, a group of domestic workers gather for coffee before catching the bus. Porchas and Camargo again try to explain the importance of testifying before the MTA. “I have

information about the buses,” Camargo announces as she follows the women to the bus stop. Within minutes, every one waiting for the bus has a bright pink flier with information about the BRU.

### **8:30 a.m.** **Bus Line #20**

Center organizers Cynthia Rojas and Deborah Orosz – two of the organization’s young up-and-coming leaders – board the bus. Orosz talks to a Salvadoran woman about the BRU’s “Clean Air, Clean Lungs, Clean Buses” campaign. Meanwhile, a woman on her way to a doctor’s appointment in Montebello complains to Rojas in Spanish about how the bus line used to take her all the way to her destination, but cuts in service have forced her to take two different buses, extending her travel time considerably.

Rojas moves to the back of the bus, where two well-dressed young men – recent immigrants from Mexico City – are on their way to their telemarketing jobs. They agree with Rojas about the need to decrease dependency on automobiles to

reduce air pollution. “It all depends on people’s attitudes for things to change. We need to change the car culture in L.A. *Queder es poder* (wanting is doing),” he says. “*Todo se puede hacer unidos* (anything can be done in unity),” says his friend.

As Rojas and Orosz continue making their way through the bus, the driver nods enthusiastically when asked if he’s heard about the BRU. “They do a great job,” he says. “They’ve been able to get more buses on the road, and they helped stop fare increases. We need more buses when it’s crowded. I’d like them to get seat belts on the buses.” He mentions that in recent labor negotiations with the MTA, the BRU’s work was highlighted. “I have more faith in them than in the MTA.”

### **9:10 a.m.**

Rojas and Orosz disembark. “It’s fulfilling to have these conversations on the bus. The woman I was talking to has twins. They’re two years old, and they have asthma,” Rojas says, pointing out the correlation between L.A.’s poor air quality and rising rates of respiratory illnesses.



**9:25 a.m.**  
**Main and Sixth Streets**  
**Offices of Maternal Child**  
**and Health Access**

Rojas meets up with Carla Gonzalez, a BRU member and trainee at the Center’s National School for Strategic Organizing, where she and five other students are learning organizing theory and practice.

Rojas and Gonzalez are scheduled to give a presentation on the Center’s *Clean Air, Clean Lungs, Clean Buses* campaign before a roomful of health professionals. A nurse mentions that there has been a 600 percent increase in asthma since 1980 in Los Angeles County.

“We have eight million cars on the road and an insufficient public transportation system. Our goals include replacing all diesel buses with buses that use cleaner-burning natural gas. We’re fighting for more bus lanes and auto-free zones, and for improving bus fuel efficiency to 50 mpg,” Rojas explains. She says that the first step in laying the groundwork for the campaign is a community survey to see if people understand air pollution, and to determine the number of cars in each household.

After their presentation, the group gives Rojas and Gonzalez a warm round of applause.

**10:37 a.m.**  
**Southeast Corner of Wilshire**  
**Boulevard and Western Avenue**  
**Bus Line #20**

Tammy Luu and Damon Azali, in yellow Bus Riders Union t-shirts, carry stacks of bright blue fliers to hand out as people wait for the bus outside the Wiltern building, where the Labor/Community Strategy Center is located. The bus stops and passengers crowd in.

Luu, a lead organizer who helps coordinate the Center’s publications, begins talking to a passenger about the inequities of Los Angeles’ transit system, explaining how the region’s new rail system is being built at the expense of local bus service. Meanwhile, Azali, who joined the Center a few years after graduating from San Francisco State University, stands in full view of all the passengers and broadcasts the message to everyone on the bus. The response is mixed. By the third stop, the bus is overcrowded with a multicultural load of passengers.

Most of the passengers are huddled near the front door. Some avoid making eye contact with the BRU organizers. Luu spends her entire time on this route talking with a young African American woman, who listens intently.

**11:03 a.m.**  
**Corner of Wilshire Boulevard**  
**and Vermont Avenue**  
**Bus Line #720**

At Wilshire and Vermont, about three miles along the route, the organizers transfer to the #720 line. Azali resumes his attempts at making one-on-one contact with riders, distributing fliers and explaining the MTA’s proposed service cuts. Most of the passengers scan the materials. Some are folded, some are tucked away into pockets and purses, and some are tossed away. “Some people say, ‘I don’t normally take the bus, my car is in the shop,’” says Azali. “We try to get them to see that these issues affect them too. We try to reach people who are affected by the bus issue regardless of whether they are daily or occasional riders.”

Luu approaches a seemingly shy young man whom she learns is a student at Los Angeles City College. She initially does

most of the talking, but slowly engages him in a discussion about how increased investments in public transit will help impact air pollution in Los Angeles. Later she gets his name and number and jots it down on her clipboard. She hopes to collect more names and phone numbers over the course of the day.

“What caught his interest was our fight with the MTA. As a student, he’s had to deal with his share of bureaucracy,” Luu says. “We try to connect bus service to bigger issues, bigger problems, like unresponsive bureaucracies. People who fight for health care, or better wages, will listen if we talk about bus service as a human rights issue. You learn how to recognize their issues.”

Azali sits down in front of two women speaking Spanish, and asks them if they’ve heard of the BRU. The women are caught off guard because Azali is African American, and they assume he doesn’t speak their language. They haven’t heard of the BRU, and he asks what they think of the MTA’s new \$3 day pass. “*Muy caro – hay mucha pobreza* (very expensive – there’s a lot of poverty) one woman says. He moves beyond the financial issue and talks to them about the environment, and the benefits of natural gas over diesel.



Azali gives the women information about an upcoming BRU meeting and asks for their names and phone numbers so he can notify them. The women are reluctant so he gives them details about the meeting, and then tries to approach a young white man deeply engrossed in a paperback novel. He politely asks Azali to move on, which he does.

Luu moves along to another young man who explains that he recently moved to Los Angeles from Mexico City. Luu talks to him about the environment, and about how the United States with just six percent of the population uses 30 percent of the world's energy resources. She explains the damage pollution causes to the ozone layer, and he tells her that L.A.'s dirty air reminds him of Mexico City. "Citizens can't do anything about the air there, so how can we change it here?" he asks. "Because we've already been able to get the MTA to switch many of its buses to natural gas," she explains. "But we need people like you to apply pressure for more newer, cleaner buses."

Luu then tries to engage another young man, who avoids eye contact. He takes a flier despite his apparent lack of interest, and she relentlessly continues talking to him.

**11:48 a.m.**  
**Corner of Wilshire and Crenshaw Boulevards**  
**Bus Line #710**

The organizers file out the back door of the #720 and wait for the #710 bus. It is filled with mostly African American passengers as it barrels its way down Crenshaw Boulevard. The landscape is dotted with 99 cent stores, liquor stores, check cashing businesses, and houses with bars over the windows.

Azali moves toward the center of the bus and begins to talk to all who will listen about the MTA's proposed service cuts. He spots a young Latina with a school-age daughter. He learns that they're on their way to Wal-Mart, and sits down next to them. The mother nods her head as Azali reviews the proposed cuts, again, speaking in Spanish. She tells him she is frustrated by the rising cost of public transit.

"I have to buy monthly passes for me and my daughter," the woman says. "The bus pass went up to \$52 a month. That's a lot. The student pass is \$20, but you have to fill out an application and then pay another \$1 just for the application. We did that and the bus pass never came."

Azali and Luu compare notes. Luu asks Azali about the woman with the young daughter. "She seemed interested, but I don't know if she'll show up," he says about the prospect of the woman attending an upcoming BRU meeting.

**1:05 p.m.**  
**Corner of Crenshaw Boulevard and Florence Avenue**

The organizers get off the #710 bus, cross Crenshaw Boulevard, and head back to Wilshire. Their on-the-bus organizing will be shorter than usual today as they have meetings and other work to tend to. Luu talks to a passenger as he waits at the bus stop. "Have you heard about the Bus Riders Union?" she asks him. "Yes, but no one's ever asked me to join," he replies.

Luu successfully engages the man in a conversation on a broad range of topics. She gets his contact information and asks him to attend the next membership meeting. He tells her he works seven days a week, and is unlikely to show up. "That happens a lot," Luu says. "People are outraged about the buses, and they say they want to help – but getting them to attend a meeting is altogether different."

**1:38 p.m.**  
As the organizers wait for the #710, they run into BRU member Ricardo Zelada, a native of El Salvador and a lead plaintiff in the consent decree between the MTA and BRU. "It's a good struggle," he says of the BRU's fight for improved bus service. "It's a struggle of the people."

Zelada explains that he has been an activist since 1957 when he protested civil rights abuses in his native country. He said he supports the demands for better public transit as part of the larger struggle for social change. "The BRU is a civil rights movement, not just a transportation fight. It's a national, international struggle for our humanity. We need to continue fighting for our civil rights, because the government and corporations will continue to oppress and discriminate. We have to be alert."

Recently retired from working in downtown sweatshops, Zelada says he appreciates the BRU because it's independent. "It is very difficult to find independent organizations. Being a member of an independent union is great because you can do whatever you want and you don't have to support a political party or candidate. You're free. Being free is the most important thing in life."



Just as the #710 pulls up, Zelada, who was out shopping in preparation for an upcoming trip to Honduras to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the country's Great Strike of 1954, asks Luu for a stack of fliers to hand out as he moves about town.

**2:30 p.m.**  
**Corner of Vermont Avenue**  
**and Martin Luther King Boulevard**  
**Bus Line #204**

On the same corner where just 12 years ago National Guardsmen armed with loaded M-16 rifles were stationed to secure the area from angry crowds who had battled with police following violence triggered by the “not guilty” verdicts of four Los Angeles police officers charged with beating black motorist Rodney King, organizers-in-training Carla Gonzalez and Patrisse Cullors join other BRU members and volunteers outside Manual Arts High School in South Los Angeles.

Many students ride the Vermont line, which Cullors claims is the densest bus line in the nation, carrying up to 56,000 passengers a day. The BRU organizers are hoping high school students will demand that MTA reduce the cost of student passes from \$20 to \$10 a month, eliminate

the bus pass “application process” which often discourages young riders and their families from taking advantage of the pass, and distribute the passes at every school.

Cullors says the overcrowding problem is a serious one for students, who often show up late for class because crowded buses don't stop for them. “We've heard stories of police waiting for students to get off the buses to give them truancy tickets,” she says. Several students confirm the reports.

Cullors joined the Center shortly after graduating from high school, where she was involved in anti-bigotry, youth leadership, and queer rights groups. A presentation at her high school by BRU organizers caught her attention, and she attended a meeting of the organization shortly thereafter.

Gonzalez, who attended Cleveland High School with Cullors, was also a student activist and joined the Center in the summer of 2002. “The first day, they put me on the bus, organizing on lines 40 and 210,” she recalls. When asked if it is more difficult to organize high school and college students versus older passengers, Cullors and Gonzalez said there was “apathy” all around.

At the bus stop near the southeast corner, Patrisse, wearing her yellow BRU t-shirt emblazoned with the words “Bus Riders Union” and “Sindicato de Pasajeros,” is recognized by Georgia Cross, a middle-aged African American who rides the bus regularly. Cross gives Cullors an earful. “They're lying about improved bus service. I wait just as long, if not longer, for the bus to come, especially on Sundays,” she says.

Cullors explains how the MTA has proposed cutting service on several lines, including buses that Cross takes. “They do this to us all the time,” Cross says angrily. “They tell us they're going to do this or that for our neighborhood, and then they fool us by only doing it for a short time or not doing it at all.”

**2:49 p.m.**

On the same corner, Viktor Ramos, a former student at Manual Arts High School and now a BRU volunteer, talks in Spanish to a mother and her three children about proposed cuts to services. Afterward, he explains his involvement in the BRU is due to his own experiences with the local bus system. “I used to have to leave an hour in advance to get to school on time,” says Ramos, a student

at Los Angeles Community College who got involved with the BRU when it began its “No Seat, No Fare” campaign, in which passengers were discouraged from paying bus fares if conditions were overcrowded.

Nearby, Sanyika Bryant, also a Los Angeles City College student, flashes a brilliant smile to get students to take his fliers. “What interested me in getting involved was not just the cause, it was the unity in people's struggles, how people were respectful of each other's differences.”

Bryant's exposure to the BRU has been a political awakening. “In high school, I wasn't very active. I remember learning about the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, and Cesar Chavez, and feeling moved by that. But I didn't really know what to do with those feelings. The Bus Riders Union has allowed me to channel those feelings.”

BRU volunteer organizer Shepherd Petit is passing out fliers from his wheelchair. Petit, who has been attending classes off and on at the local city college for three decades, joined the BRU after organizers made a presentation at the college about seven years ago.



“I remember she started talking about the overcrowding of buses and how the MTA needed to purchase more buses to reduce overcrowding. And I thought, ‘Hey, this is me.’ I am constantly being passed up by buses because they’re overcrowded. And the wheelchair ramps don’t work on most of the older buses,” says Petit. “I would always be late to doctor appointments and school. When you’re disabled, you’re isolated. You’re captive in your own home. I organize because this is a problem that hits home. I tell people it’s your tax dollars. They’re spending \$200 million for each mile of rail, while the MTA is making cuts. It takes two or three buses to get to a destination. The public needs to know this.”

**3:05 p.m.**

Students begin to pour out of Manual Arts High School as half a dozen police cars descend upon the school in an effort to deter gang violence. The BRU members hand out fliers and talk to the occasional teenager who takes the time to stop and listen. “They have a three-second attention span,” comments Carla Gonzalez.

At one corner, three ninth graders wait for the bus after spending the day in detention for habitual tardiness. The girls insist that they are late to class because overcrowded buses pass them up each morning. “I swear it’s not our fault,” says one of the girls.

**3:30 p.m.**

Nearly all of the students are gone. When asked if she feels it’s been a successful afternoon, Cullors nods. “They see us here all the time. They see that we care about them.”

**3:50 p.m.  
Southeast corner of Wilshire  
Boulevard and El Camino Way  
Bus Line #720**

After work at the posh Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Beverly Hills, where BRU volunteer organizer Rosalio Mendiola has been a room service attendant for more than 30 years, he changes out of his white hotel uniform and puts on a yellow BRU t-shirt before walking two short blocks to a Metro Rapid #720. He steps onto the crowded bus, and pulls out a thick stack of purple fliers from a worn black binder.

He hands them out to the weary, disinterested passengers who are on their way home from a long day’s work. He talks to some passengers in Spanish, others in English. A few engage with him.

**4:05 p.m.  
Corner of Wilshire Boulevard  
and Normandie Avenue**

At Wilshire and Normandie, one of the limited stops on the #720, Mendiola gets off. The 69-year-old native of Mexico switches to a “local” bus that will continue taking him down Wilshire to a meeting of his hotel workers union. Mendiola has been with the BRU for nearly a decade and has never missed a weekly Wednesday night meeting. Among his favorite memories is a dance-a-thon fundraiser. Fellow organizer Eulalia Camargo was his dance partner. They danced for nearly eight hours.

“I love the BRU. These people are my family. We have long meetings to ensure the democratic process. The people come from all over the world. They motivate me,” he says. “People are apathetic. They don’t listen to the radio, or read newspapers, or watch the TV news.”

“Bus service is within one’s basic human rights. I feel obligated to help. I want to set an example,” he continues. When asked why he feels obligated to help, Mendiola’s chest swells with emotion. “It’s important. It makes me feel better. It makes me feel good,” he says.

**4:30 p.m.  
Koreatown**

As the afternoon commuter rush gets underway, BRU organizers Luu and Hee Pok Kim, an 82-year-old native of North Korea who has devoted her golden years to fighting for social justice, work the street corners of Koreatown in L.A.’s densely-populated Mid-Wilshire district. “Grandma Kim,” as she has come to be known, is one of the BRU’s most active and vocal organizers. She has passionately testified before the MTA in her native Korean. She doesn’t let anyone slip by her without taking a flier. She is focused in her mission to get others to join the fight.

Although Koreatown is home to an estimated 100,00 Korean Americans, it is also an eclectic neighborhood with people of all backgrounds. Kim uses the little bit of English and Spanish she has learned to get people’s attention. Sometimes she’ll simply tap strangers on the shoulder.





But mostly she talks to passersby in Korean. She only occasionally organizes on moving buses because she suffers from back pain, but she hasn't let that stop her from taking to the streets.

With her petite stature, white hair, and bright yellow BRU t-shirt, she is a regular fixture in the neighborhood. Young Koreans stop and acknowledge her to show their respect. Older men are also captured by her vigor and enthusiasm. Older women, however, sometimes scoff at her visible activism. "They tell me, 'You old lady, why don't you just stay home and watch TV.' I tell them I am doing this because you don't," she says through an interpreter. "I also tell them, you ride the bus. You have a responsibility to do this, not only young people."

Kim said one reason Korean seniors frown upon her organizing efforts is because they hear the word "union" and they think labor union and see it as some Left thing. There are very conservative forces in the Korean community and as I see myself as part of a world Left, I have to face how uphill my job is. But, I am still willing to do it. Everyone my age lived through the Korean War, and there were a lot of tragic things we experienced. That shapes how we see things."

Despite some of the negative responses, Kim and Luu have managed to recruit a number of Koreans to the BRU. The meetings are all trilingual, with discussions simultaneously translated in English, Spanish, and Korean.

**5:30 p.m.**  
**Labor/Community Strategy Center**  
**Corner of Wilshire Boulevard**  
**and Western Avenue**

The smell of Chinese take-out permeates the room as members of the Center's Planning Committee sets up for its weekly meeting. Food is a big part of the Center and its activities – and part of a decidedly nurturing culture, says Eric Mann, executive director. "A lot of people here have rough family lives and there is a strong nurturing component in the culture of the Center. Our food budget is probably our highest. Every meeting at night has food. So the food, along with our inter-generational approach, is part of the concept that a good organization has to have a very strong nurturing culture, and a very family-like culture. And it means that we sometimes fight like family, but you're welcome here."

**6 p.m.**  
**BRU Planning Committee Meeting**  
**Labor/Community Strategy Center**  
**Wiltern Building**

*The Bus Riders Union Planning Committee is the collective policy-making leadership body of the organization. The Committee meets at least weekly to set the direction of the Bus Riders Union's political campaigns, civil rights legal case, and overall political strategy, based on decisions made at the BRU's general membership meetings, which take place monthly. Among other things, the Committee is responsible for planning and chairing the BRU's membership meetings, for media strategy and correspondence, and for leading new member orientations.*

Although the Planning Committee has a number of tactical and other issues to address in its ongoing efforts to fight for transportation and other rights, the evening's agenda begins with committee member introductions. Afterward, volunteer BRU organizer Eulalia Camargo jumps out of her seat to lead a "Sindicato de BRU" cheer.

**8:55 p.m.**  
**Labor/Community Strategy Center**

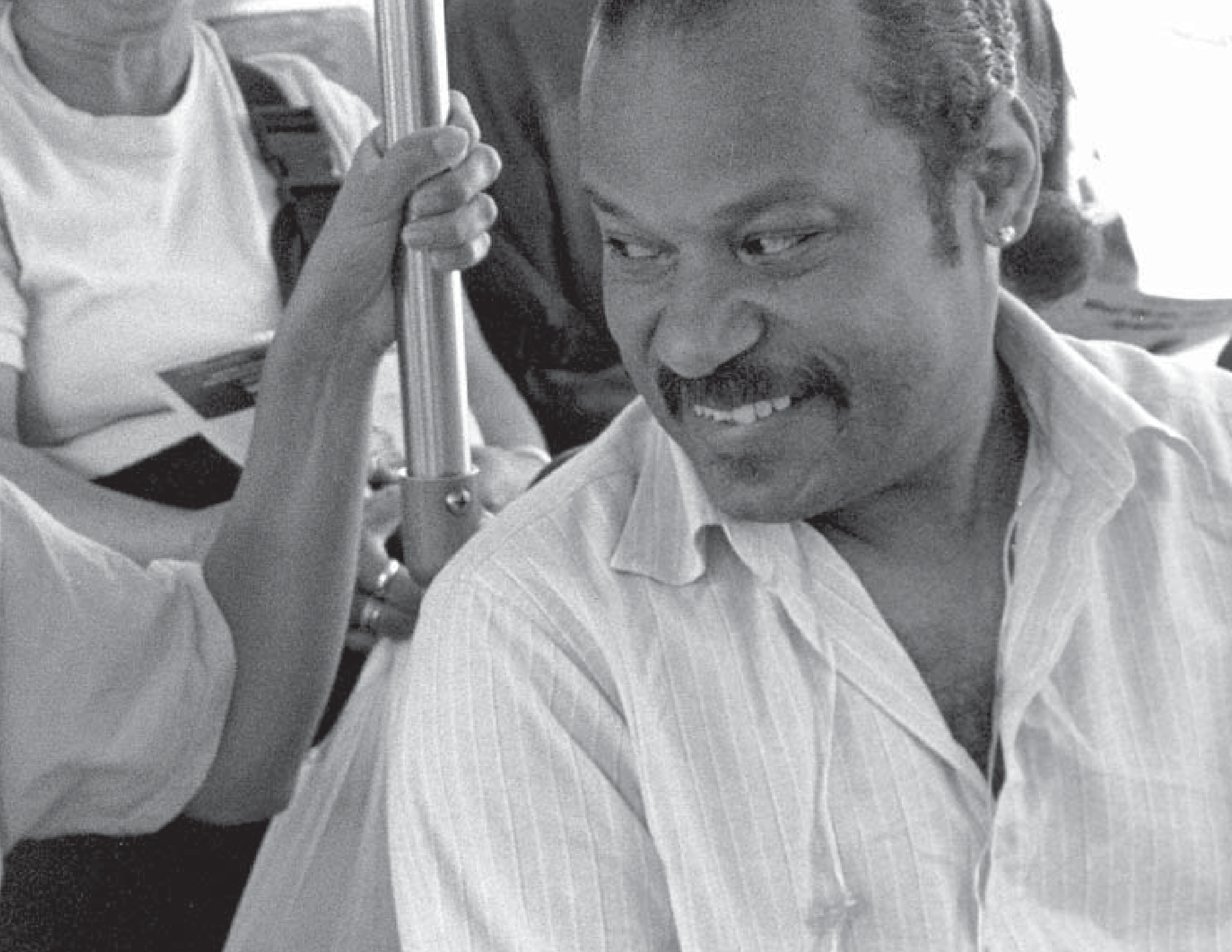
Although the day has come to an end for some of the volunteers and staff of the Labor/Community Strategy Center, for others it continues well into the night. In the Center's conference room, Azali is testing equipment for a PowerPoint presentation about a recent trip to El Salvador taken by representatives of the Center to oversee recent elections there.

And in her cramped but neat office, Rojas is working on the Bus Riders Union membership data base. Doors open and slam shut throughout the maze-like office as people come and go.

It's late and it's been a long day and evening, but there are still various meetings to attend, numbers to crunch, fliers to prepare, and people to talk to about making a change in their community.

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

*Frederick Douglass*



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